Australian Humanities Review

Public Intellectuals, Book Culture and Civil Society

David Carter

To facilitate downloading,
this paper has been divided
into parts one, two & three

This essay has had a response from MacKenzie Wark.

I

Introduction: the rise and rise of the public intellectual

My starting point is the remarkable rise to prominence of public intellectuals – and talk about public intellectuals – over the last decade in Australia. Since 1997, especially, this has occurred around Indigenous questions with the result that issues such as the stolen generations, genocide, the apology and reconciliation have also gained new prominence. This is undeniably a good thing. New ways of thinking about history and the nation and new kinds of public ethical discourse have been put into circulation. History as battleground is preferable to the great Australian silence. And yet – my starting point is also the ambivalent effects and meanings of these recent developments, not least the way that the debates have centred so much around the figure of the 'public intellectual', the way that certain kinds of intellectuals and intellectual discourse have come to dominate the mainstream representation of the issues.

Many individuals have felt compelled to 'go public' in response to one or more in a series of cultural and political events, especially since the Howard-Hanson election of early 1996. Over these divisive years, there has probably been a general 'ramping up' of public discourse. But my focus is not on the broad field of academics, lawyers, health professionals, lobbyists and so forth who have gone public over this or that issue; rather it is on the specific, highly valued, and highly publicised sense of the public intellectual, the fullest and weightiest sense of the term, which has come into prominence over the same period.

The case could be pursued through an analysis of the rhetoric of particular arguments and the sense of rationality or history or moral authority which they inscribe. I'll come back to this, to some degree, a little later. First, though, I want to take a different approach by trying to define the 'economy' of the public intellectual. In other words, the structural or institutional context – the relations between the market, the media and the academy – within which the new public intellectuals have not only emerged but thrived. My premise is that public intellectuals need to be understood as structural or institutional effects, not merely in terms of individual capacities. I want to do this, via rather a long detour, by understanding the rise and rise of the public intellectual as one in a series of new developments and major structural changes in what I've called Australian book culture.

Most optimistically, I'll suggest we can read these developments as producing new sites for 'civil society'. Less optimistically, I want to attack the idea of the public intellectual as it has operated in this contemporary context, and in particular the relations of value between the ethical, the aesthetic and history which it has brought into being.

As a way of getting a lever under the moral weight of the public intellectual, we might note a peculiar feature of their recent publicity – that the new rise to prominence of the public intellectual has been accompanied by a great rise, as well, in talk about the *decline* of public intellectual life, the narrowing or disintegration of public culture, a crisis in the contemporary public sphere. As we know, only public intellectuals talk that way. Public intellectuals might be defined as those who see a crisis where others see an event. Although generically a form of over-statement, this can be a useful thing to do as shown by many of the interventions provoked by John Howard's aggressive quietism where the politics of history are concerned. But what does it tell us about how the category of the public intellectual circulates as a specific value? And why might this not be such a good thing after

all?

Commodities and crisis: public intellectuals, the essay and the memoir

The recent Australian history of public intellectual interventions has been defined by a series of events dramatised as crises, at once ethical and national: the Demidenko affair of 1994-95; the controversy surrounding Helen Garner's *The First Stone* (1995-96); the Manning Clark affair (1996-97); the election of Pauline Hanson (1996); the republic debate (to 1999); the stolen generations issue as brought to light by the *Bringing the Home* report (from 1997); the subsequent refusal of Howard to apologise to Indigenous Australians; the mounting debate over reconciliation; and most recently the debate over genocide and massacres. Looking at this list, we can see two seemingly unconnected strands: first, 'culture wars' over political correctness; second, race and specifically Indigenous issues (with the republic debate as a kind of hinge between them). As Mark Davis (1999a) and Ken Wark (1997) have shown, the weight of argument in the first sequence was reactionary – anti-political correctness, anti-the new academy, anti-'new class' and so on. The balance has shifted since 1997. Reconciliation issues have become central and, as Manne himself has made clear, the conservative backlash has been savage and sustained. But to understand the particular role of the public intellectual I think we need to remember its founding moment in the culture wars of the mid-nineties, for the kind of cultural and moral authority claimed then is still the kind of moral and cultural authority claimed today, even when the issues have changed. The Demidenko affair for Robert Manne was symptomatic of a larger cultural failure, Australia's 'culture of forgetting', which was sheeted home particularly to the post-modern academy. I tend instead towards Wark's argument that what we saw over the course of the debate was evidence to the contrary, that 'the public political process ... actually worked quite well ... [and that] the pervasiveness of the contemporary media made this possible' (p. 130).

It also made the public intellectual possible. Since the middle of the nineties, figures such as Robert Dessaix, Drusilla Modjeska, Andrew Riemer, Raimond Gaita, Henry Reynolds, Tim Flannery, Peter Read, Robert Manne, Michael Duffy, Mark Davis, Inga Clendinnen and Ken Wark, to list only some of the more prominent, have joined old stagers such as Donald Horne, Phillip Adams and Paddy McGuinness in the higher reaches of our public culture to become prominent commentators and minor celebrities – in short, public intellectuals according to any of the many definitions. There has been a boom in public intellectuals, in their publications and in the publicity surrounding them.

Such abundance is largely unprecedented. Why, then, the recurrent theme of cultural decline or crisis? Both dimensions are present in Robert Dessaix's collection, *Speaking their Minds* (1998), a series of discussions with public intellectuals based on an earlier ABC radio series from 1996-97. Dessaix's list of speakers indeed suggests an abundance in public intellectual life. Close to forty individuals get to speak in the book. But the occasion of the series and Dessaix's framing comments are stated throughout, almost obsessively, in the language of crisis. This is, in a sense, its market opportunity. As the book's cover blurb puts it, ironically enough in the up-beat language of the marketplace, 'when there is increasing dissatisfaction about the role the academy should play, when media personalities are replacing thinkers as public commentators, and intellectual forums find little place in public life ... *Speaking their Minds* puts thinking in Australia back on the agenda'. Or in Dessaix's terms, public intellectual culture in Australia is defined by 'the lack of national forums, the fragmentation of the public for intellectual discussion, the dearth of independent intellectuals, the corporatisation of the academy, even the spread of excluding, specialised languages' (294).

I'll come back to the specific items in this list as the relationship between the category of the public intellectual, on the one hand, and both the media and the academy, on the other, is crucial for understanding the origins of the 'decline' narrative. For the moment, I want to consider the rise of public intellectuals alongside two other developments in contemporary Australian culture which I think are equally remarkable: the new taste for the *essay* and the new taste for *memoir*.

First, the essay. If the short story was the genre for the seventies, and the novel, perhaps, the genre for the eighties, then the essay has become the literary mode for the present. The number of books of Australian essays published since the mid-nineties is, again, an unprecedented development in the local marketplace – so too the *kinds* of books of essays being published for the 'educated general reader' (we need to take such market categories seriously for they define the field of book culture). These essays range widely over public and intimate, momentous and mundane topics – indeed they specialise in mixing the two. Often the topic is less important than what we might call the 'writerly performance' or as

Peter Craven has recently said of Dessaix's non-fiction, he 'proved himself to be someone whose signature mattered more than the thing he signed' (Craven 2001, p. 11). Typically the genre is 'intensely personal', registering events and sensations through the modes of interiority. Hence their distance from the formal academic essay (which has continued to appear much as before although with more 'bleeding' between genres and audiences).

The growth in the essay field has been remarkable since the middle of the decade (see Figure 1) with, among others, three annual volumes of the best Australian essays, edited by Peter Craven in 1998, 1999 and 2000; Morag Fraser's 'best Antipodean essays' of 1998; Imre Saluzinsky's historical anthology of 1997; collections by individuals including Helen Garner's *True Stories* (1996) and more recently *The Feel of Steel* (2001); Les Murray's selected prose (1997); Robert Manne's *The Way We Live Now* (1998), Dessaix's *And So Forth* (1998), David Malouf's and Inga Clendinnen's Boyer lectures (1998 & 1999); and book-length essays such as Manne's *The Culture of Forgetting* (1996), Ken Wark's *The Vernacular Republic* (1997), Clendinnen's *Reading the Holocaust* (1998) and *Tiger's Eye* (2000), and Modjeska's *Stravinsky's Lunch* (1999). In addition to the books, the *Australian's Review of Books* published essays and essay-style reviews between 1996 and 2001; *Australian Book Review* publishes a sponsored essay each issue (and has recently become both more literary and more 'essay-ish'); essay-based magazines like *Eureka Street* are thriving; and earlier this year, Schwartz Publishing launched the first Australian Quarterly Essay with Robert Manne's *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*.

I'll return to the essay later and more critically, but in a book culture where a print run of 3,000 is substantial this range of publications is an extraordinary proliferation of 'product' at the less popular end of the market. We might also note the publishers – predominantly new independent Australian publishers defining local markets where the multinationals can't see them. Clearly the industry, the marketplace, isn't behaving as if there were a crisis in public intellectual life. Why, then, are intellectuals so consistently thinking otherwise? Why, we might want to ask, are they so institutionally blind to their own circumstances?

Figure 1 Books of essays 1994-2001 (selective)

Cassandra Pybus, ed., *Columbus' Blindness and Other Essays* (UQP 1994)
Helen Garner, *The First Stone* (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1995)
Peter Coleman, ed., *Double Take: Six Incorrect Essays* (Reed/Mandarin 1996)
Helen Garner, *True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction* (Text 1996)
Robert Manne, *The Culture of Forgetting: Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust* (Text 1996)
Andrew Riemer, *The Demidenko Debate* (Allen & Unwin 1996)
Phillip Adams, ed., *The Retreat from Tolerance* (ABC Books 1997)
Les Murray, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Duffy & Snellgrove 1997)
Imre Salusinszky, ed., *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays* (OUP 1997)
McKenzie Wark, *The Virtual Republic: Australia's Culture Wars of the 1990s* (Allen & Unwin 1997)
Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Text 1998)
Peter Craven, ed., *The Best Australian Essays 1998* (Bookman 1998)
Robert Dessaix, *And So Forth* (Picador 1998)
Robert Dessaix, ed., *Speaking their Minds: Intellectuals and the Public Culture in Australia* (ABC Books 1998)
Morag Fraser, ed., *Seams of Light: Best Antipodean Essays* (Allen & Unwin 1998)
David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play : The Making of Australian Consciousness* (ABC 1998).
Robert Manne, *The Way We Live Now: The Controversies of the Nineties* (Text 1998)
Cassandra Pybus, *Till Apples Grow on an Orange Tree* (UQP 1998)
Inga Clendinnen, *True Stories* (ABC 1999)
Peter Craven, ed., *The Best Australian Essays 1999* (Bookman 1999)
Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love, Truth & Justice* (Text 1999)
Simon Leys, *The Angel and the Octopus: Collected Essays* (Duffy & Snellgrove 1999)
Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch* (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1999)
Peter Timms, *The Nature of Gardens* (Allen & Unwin 1999)
Inga Clendinnen, *Tiger's Eye: A Memoir* (Text 2000)
Peter Craven, ed., *The Best Australian Essays 2000* (Black Inc 2000)
Michelle Grattan, ed., *Essays on Australian Reconciliation* (Black Inc 2000)
Robert Manne, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*, The Australian Quarterly Essay 1 (Schwarz 2001)
Helen Garner, *The Feel of Steel* (Picador 2001)

A number of the titles I've just listed could also be tendered as evidence for the second factor I want to mention, the vogue for autobiographical writing and in particular for those forms blending memoir and essay or memoir and fiction. Helen Garner's, for example, or Cassandra Pybus', to which we can add such works as the memoirs of Raimond Gaita and

Andrew Riemer, Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye*, or the 'ficto-memoirs' of Modjeska's *The Orchard* and Dessaix's *Night Letters* (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Memoirs and related texts 1994-2001 (selective)
Drusilla Modjeska, *The Orchard* (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1994)
Robert Dessaix, *Night Letters* (Pan Macmillan 1996)
Helen Garner, *True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction* (Text 1996)
Andrew Riemer, *Sandstone Gothic* (Allen & Unwin 1998)
Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch* (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1999)
Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't we Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About our History* (Penguin/Viking 1999)
Raimond Gaita, *Romulus, My Father* (Text 1999)
Andrew Riemer, *Between the Fish and the Mudcake* (Allen & Unwin 1999)
Inga Clendinnen, *Tiger's Eye: A Memoir* (Text 2000)
Brian Matthews, *A Fine and Private Place* (Pan Macmillan 2000)
Helen Garner, *The Feel of Steel* (Picador 2001)

Modjeska and Dessaix are particularly interesting. Almost single (or double) handedly their successes have altered the nature of Australian book culture and, indeed, the industry. They've done so through the way their books in the mid-nineties successfully marketed intensely aesthetic, unapologetically high cultural and self-consciously ethical literary works to a wide audience – not a mass audience, perhaps, but they *were* best sellers in the broad literary market. There was clearly a developing audience for certain modes of interiority and of aesthetic experience – aesthetic in the sense I want to use for this paper to describe what happens when style, voice or authorial persona is invested with ethical value. In the process, both authors have developed a public presence beyond that of 'mere' novelists (or mere historians for that matter). They have become *writers* in the fullest sense of the term, and this in turn has meant them becoming at least one kind of public intellectual. Literariness, as a value, has been transferred from 'everyday' kinds of fiction to these new, rarer 'non-fiction' modes, at once high aesthetic and highly marketable. That the memoir is often a form of history-writing as well adds seriously to its 'being ethical', a point to which I'll return towards the end of the essay.

In short, it was precisely high aesthetic value and moral seriousness that were packaged as desirable commodities. *The Orchard*, in particular, in its first hardback release, sparked off a whole series of new books with high production values and art-house design pitched at morally-serious readers, books presented as 'precious objects' and desirable possessions in a circuit of exchange of symbolic value. Andrew Riemer's review of Nick Jose's novel, *The Red Thread*, captured the sought-after qualities: 'Everything – the *trompe-l'oeil* dust jacket, the typeface, the artwork ... and the quality of the paper – contributes to a sense of restrained sensuousness, luxury tempered by elegance and good taste' (Riemer 2000). [continued ...]

Continue with parts two and three of this essay.

Bibliographical references, author's biographical note and relevant links can be found at the conclusion of part three of this essay.

Please feel free to contribute to this discourse.

emuse current good oil archive